
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Abiding in Love

A Sermon by

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Scripture: John 15:1-8

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By the way, Moms and those women who have been as if Mothers to us, we love you and thank you for the gift of life and the abiding love your presence brings.

This week, on Friday, I received this email from my friend Jan. The email read:

Our 14 year old dog, Abby, died last month. The day after she died, my four year old daughter Meredith was crying and talking about how much she missed Abby. She asked if we could write a letter to God so that when Abby got to heaven, God would recognize her. I told her that I thought we could, so she dictated these words:

Dear God,

Will you please take care of my dog? She died yesterday and is with you in heaven. I miss her very much. I am happy that you let me have her as my dog even though she got sick.

I hope you will play with her. She likes to play with balls and swim. I am sending a picture of her so when you see her, you will know that she is my dog. I really miss her.

Love, Meredith

We put the letter in an envelope with a picture of Abby and Meredith and addressed it to God/Heaven. We put our return address on it. Then Meredith pasted several stamps on the front of the envelope because she said it would take lots of stamps to get the letter all the way to heaven.

That afternoon she dropped it into the letter box at the post office. A few days later, she asked if God had gotten the letter yet. I told her that I thought He had.

Yesterday, there was a package wrapped in gold paper on our front porch addressed, "To Meredith" in an unfamiliar hand. Meredith opened it. Inside was a book by Mr. Rogers called, "When a Pet Dies." Taped to the inside front cover was the letter we had written to God in its opened envelope. On the opposite page was the picture of Abby and Meredith and this note:

Dear Meredith,

Abbey arrived safely in heaven. Having the picture was a big help. I recognized Abby right away.

Abbey isn't sick any more. Her spirit is here with me just like it stays in your heart. Abbey loved being your dog. Since we don't need our bodies in heaven, I don't have any pockets to keep your picture in, so I am sending it back to you in this little book for you to keep and have something to remember Abby by.

Thank you for the beautiful letter and thank your mother for helping you write it and sending it to me. What a wonderful mother you have. I picked her especially for you.

I send my blessings every day, and remember that I love you very much. By the way, I'm easy to find. I am wherever there is love.

Love, God

Confirmands, I don't know how many of you know that I have been growing grapes for about two years. In my life I have grown a lot of trees, shrubs, flowers, but never grapes. When Church of the Beatitudes bought the first Flynn Lane house, it had a swimming pool behind it that we had to tear out. Next to that pool were two grapevines. As the backhoe was about to tear them out, I asked the operator if he would dig out the vines for me. So he scooped out the two grapevines in the next stroke and helped me put them in my car. Ron Mark shared with me the wisdom of how to replant them. Since that day they have developed into wonderful plants. At first I just wanted to save the plants. Then I wanted them pretty much for shade, but guess what? They also grow grapes. Pretty cool.

Today, as I have continued to recognize my limited Grape competence I was blessed to be able to seek guidance from a master Gardener named Terry Whiddon and I have extended my vineyard to four flourishing grape plants each with grapes, leaves, vine, roots, and where they bring shade to cool my home, fruit and a sense of lush, comforting, green, love.

Each morning at about 6:00 I turn on the coffee pot, walk Fire, and then go out and attend to the vines. Each vine grows about three or four inches a day. These root systems have multiple vines. I have learned that about December when the days cool, the leaves fall off. At that time I trim back the extraneous vines to about the second or third bud out from the core vine system, and from these in the spring emerges the grapes. These bunches of grapes on my vine this year are pretty plentiful and large. I was surprised.

But the grapes were not my original purpose. I originally felt bad that they were just being dug up and thrown away. Then when I planted them and they thrived, I was excited that I could create a natural shade system on my patio. That worked pretty well, so I got some manure and put it on their roots and, low and behold, there were grapes, and now I have found I am pretty excited about the grapes.

Then came this scripture. I wondered what Jesus was talking about. What don't I know about grapes that Jesus might have been referring to?

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

A grapevine grows a lot of little shoots, hundreds about every two to four inches. At a leaf the vine will throw off a shoot that its first year of growth will not grow fruit. In Jesus day, growing grapes in the desert was very valuable. They get as little water as we do. Each drop is precious. The plants require constant attention because the young shoots will, as they branch out where they touch the ground, try to start new grape plants. During the 3- to 5-month hot dry season, these branches cannot survive. So they are cut off. The fruit is lifted up and placed on a rock so that it will ripen without contamination.

The fruit is so valuable that they actually build watchtowers of rock at the high points to keep animals and people from taking the fruit.

Jesus, His heavenly origins and his task in life, earthly life, are one in the same: to bring a connection to the creative force of life and love. He gives his gracious life that we might have it with joy and abundance. The church remains that vine and life force. Like the vine brings life to the grape, so Christ brings God's life to those who are connected to it.

Today, confirmands, you make public this decision to be part of Christ's grace and love. Welcome. May the connection bring richness of life and a sense of justice and truth in your living.